

Sunoco streamlines help desk

Outsourcing key to PC Standardization

BY JON BRODGIN

Supporting 7,000 PCs at 130 sites is never easy, but the job becomes a huge headache when it seems like each one is running a different operating system and set of applications.

That's essentially the situation recently faced by Sunoco's IT department. The 7,000 PCs were using 40 PC models and images, 35 combinations of core desktop software and hardware, and literally thousands of applications.

"Name anybody who ever manufactured a computer and we probably had some of those out there," Mark Quarles, manager of infrastructure services for Sunoco, said during a presentation at the recent Gartner Symposium/ITxpo in Orlando (www.nwdocfinder.com/2163).

Business units were refreshing systems at different rates, buying different programs, and using different versions of operating systems and office suites.

"We wanted one management environment that would be locked down," Quarles said. "We didn't have a good way to put security patches out because we didn't have a robust distribution system, and even if we did have one the environment was so diverse we couldn't plan on getting everything out to the right people."

That was two years ago. Today, essentially 100% of Sunoco machines are using the same Windows XP image and the same set of applications, according to Quarles. About 85% of machines are locked down, meaning a typical user can run programs but not install or change anything. For the first time in years, Sunoco's IT team has time to take a breath and think about bigger-picture issues.

"We started to free up Sunoco resources to be able to study and plan things," Quarles said. "We weren't running around trying to fix weird little problems. We actually had the time to sit down and think a little bit. And that ended up being useful to us."

For Sunoco, which has its headquarters in Philadelphia, outsourcing was the key to standardizing its PC suites. "As with many large corporations, some business

units were autonomous and resistant to change. Sunoco did not have all the skills and resources to accomplish the change internally," states a Gartner report detailing the Sunoco project.

Sunoco turned to CompuCom Systems, an IT outsourcing company, to handle its help desk and PC support services. CompuCom planned and executed the project and designed system capabilities, while Sunoco retained overall control over the project's strategy and design.

Sunoco also handled internal communications, which were a challenge when it came to convincing business units to agree to a change. Sunoco operates five business lines – refining and supply, retail marketing, logistics, coke (the kind used to produce blast furnace steel) and chemicals.

Knowing that "no plan survives contact with the enemy," Quarles said Sunoco IT approached the upgrades one business unit at a time and one building at a time. "We felt by doing it this way we could learn incrementally throughout the process ... so each one would be smoother and less painful both for the people we're impacting and ourselves," he said.

Some users didn't want to buy in, for reasons as innocuous as not wanting to lose a screen saver. Some business units were simply happy with what they had and didn't see the point of changing. IT first held meetings with Sunoco's executive team to win high-level backing, and then approached each business unit to explain how standardization would improve user experience.

IT performed separate evaluations of each site, both hardware and software, often finding that 90% of applications could be eliminated. Prior to standardization, Sunoco had six regional help desks, each with different procedures, and various hardware standards, making it difficult to deploy enterprisewide applications. Sunoco's goal was to improve the reliability and quality of support by going from a decentralized decision-making model to one with standard platforms across the company, according to Gartner.

Within a year of starting the project, IT

Standardization at Sunoco

The goal: Standardize 7,000 PCs at 130 sites.

The problem: Many types of PCs running multiple versions of office suites and operating systems, such as:

- 35 combinations of core desktop software and hardware.
- 40 PC models and images.
- Thousands of applications.

The outcome: Virtually every Sunoco PC is running the same version of Windows XP and the same applications.

The benefits:

- Easier for IT to distribute security patches.
- 46% decrease in the number of help desk requests per PC.
- User satisfaction rates reach all-time high.
- User downtime hits all-time low.
- A standardized, managed environment makes it easier for IT to provide support and deploy enterprisewide applications.

SOURCE: GARTNER

was able to standardize the PCs into one centrally managed environment for every business line – except chemicals.

"The chemicals were our doubting Thomases," Quarles said. "They had told us ... 'We'll come to your model when you can demonstrate you can do better than we're doing, at a better price point and better quality.'"

The chemicals unit finally relented in April 2006, deciding that IT had been doing a pretty good job, after all. The statistics bear that out: Complaints to the help desk for desktop problems have decreased 46%, surveys show that user satisfaction reached an all-time high, and user downtime is at an all-time low.

Getting the final business unit online, Quarles said, "was a validation for us that we had been doing the right things." ■

